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ABSTRACT

This report examines the role of participative decision-making in education by reviewing significant research on the involvement of teachers in educational policy-making. The discussion attempts to put participative decision-making (PDM) in perspective by highlighting empirical research on how well PDM works and by identifying some of the conditions that determine how well a specific PDM program is likely to work. Based on this analysis, general guidelines are offered to aid school administrators interested in developing PDM programs for their own schools. (Author/JG)

ERIC CLEARINGHOUSE ON EDUCATIONAL MANAGEMENT

RESEARCH ACTION BRIEF

Number 2 July 1977

Each *Research Action Brief* reports the findings of significant empirical research studies on a topic in educational management. From these findings implications are drawn for the operation of today's schools, thus serving as a guide for enlightened administrative action.

Participative Decision-Making

In education, participative decision-making (PDM) can refer to almost any effort to involve more people in the process of making school policy. What defines PDM is not so much a specific program as a basic assumption—that a school will be most successful in identifying its needs and developing policies to meet those needs when decision-making enlists a wide range of people to work together exchanging ideas and insights. A school's administration may or may not share ultimate authority over decision, but by definition, PDM requires that there be formal ways for people outside of the administration to contribute directly to the decision-making process.

Within this general framework, PDM can take a variety of specific forms. For example, "participation" can mean almost anything from simply offering advice to taking an active role in policy-making. In addition, school policy itself is a flexible term that can cover matters as diverse as student dress codes, curriculum and instructional methods, and building design.

In theory, there is also a wide range of different groups that may seek an active role in policy-making, including principals, teachers, students, parents, and the taxpaying public. In practice, however, most discussions of PDM focus on the role of a single group—classroom teachers—in the decision-making process. Our own discussion will reflect this reality, with the hope that what is true for participation by teachers will be true for that of other groups as well.

Because PDM can take so many forms, it is hardly surprising that enough benefits have been claimed to make it almost seem like education's version of a patent-medicine remedy. Our discussion will attempt to put PDM into perspective, with special emphasis on the empirical research that has been done to determine how well it actually works. We will also attempt to identify some of the specific conditions that determine how well a specific PDM program is likely to work. Finally, we will suggest some general guidelines for school administrators interested in developing PDM programs for their own schools.

Rationale

The most fundamental argument for PDM is that it is the method of school policy-making most consistent with democratic principles. The belief that those affected by public institutions should have some voice in how they are run is deeply rooted in America's laws and traditions. Making schools more democratic is desirable as an end in itself; it may also be useful as a way of offering students the learning experience of seeing a democratic institution in operation.

Participative decision-making can also improve schools in more specific ways by promoting both better decisions and their more effective implementation. Broader participation increases the number of different viewpoints and interests that are expressed and considered while a decision is being made,

and this, in turn, may encourage better decisions. PDM also helps improve communication within a school by providing formal channels for the exchange of information and ideas. Finally, PDM can allow a school community to make more effective use of its human resources, particularly by tapping the expertise and problem-solving skills of its teachers and by reducing the distance between where a decision is made and where it is put into practice.

Some writers also suggest that PDM can improve school morale. For example, the fact that teachers are consulted about decisions shows them that the school values their opinions; this, in turn, may give them greater feelings of professional pride and job satisfaction. In addition, people who have helped make a policy—and feel that it is somehow their own—are likely to understand it more thoroughly and be more confident of its wisdom and more committed to its success than those who have not.

Evidence

Only a handful of empirical studies have attempted to judge these claims. Although the results have not been conclusive, they do shed some light on the benefits and the limitations of increasing teacher participation in decision-making.

Piper compared the quality of decisions made by individuals acting alone with those they made in groups. The researcher first gave each individual subject a test that required making a series of decisions. While members of a control group simply retook the test individually, the remaining subjects were divided into three types of groups for retesting. One type (consensus) had no leaders; group members discussed the problems until they reached solutions that were accepted—though not necessarily agreed upon—by everyone in the group. In the second type of group (participative-best), the individual who had scored highest on the test was chosen group leader and given the responsibility for making decisions after eliciting advice from the rest of the group. The third type (participative-worst) worked the same way, except that individuals with the lowest scores were designated as leaders.

The results of the testing strongly favored group decisions. While the individuals who retook the test actually scored slightly worse on a second try, each type of group did much better than the average of its members' intitial scores. The consensus group decisions were better than the individual averages, and several groups actually outperformed even their best individuals. In each participative-best group, the leaders made better decisions with help than they had made acting alone. The decisions of the participative-worst leaders improved dramatically, though only one such group was able to surpass its best individual.

Although the exercise used for this test was not related to education, its results are significant because they form such a consistent pattern. All the leaders—good test-takers and bad—gained from the participation of others, and in no case did listening to the advice of others cause a leader to make less correct decisions. Thus, as Piper suggests, the results indicate that "if arriving at the most correct decision is the primary goal, the involvement of several people . . . will provide better results than the 'one-man-deciding-alone' model."

Several studies have considered how teachers feel about their involvement in decision-making. Each study attempted to find out whether and under what circumstances increased participation led to increased satisfaction with the school organization.

Inkpen and others questioned teachers about their actual and desired levels of participation in the making of various kinds of decisions. They found that teachers desire greater increases in participation in some areas than in others. The type of decision being made may, therefore, influence how favorable teachers are toward increased participation.

Knoop and O'Reilly considered how much decision-making power teachers wanted in certain curriculum-related areas. They found that teachers generally preferred that principals and department heads have less direct control over these decisions. In general, however, this did not mean that the teachers themselves wanted more control; instead, they expressed a strong desire for a collaborative role. As the authors put it, "They seem satisfied to act as data and information sources and prefer to have the final decision made by the principal." This implies that the desire for participation may also be related to the form the participation is to take.

Another researcher's findings, too, emphasize how important it is that teachers be offered the right forms of participation. Lowell studied the relative effectiveness of three different types of decision-making groups—consensus, majority vote, and centralist (leader dominated). He specifically focused on the effect these different decision-making processes would have on the members' attitudes toward the process itself, their willingness to alter their own initial private opinions, and their satisfaction with the group solution.

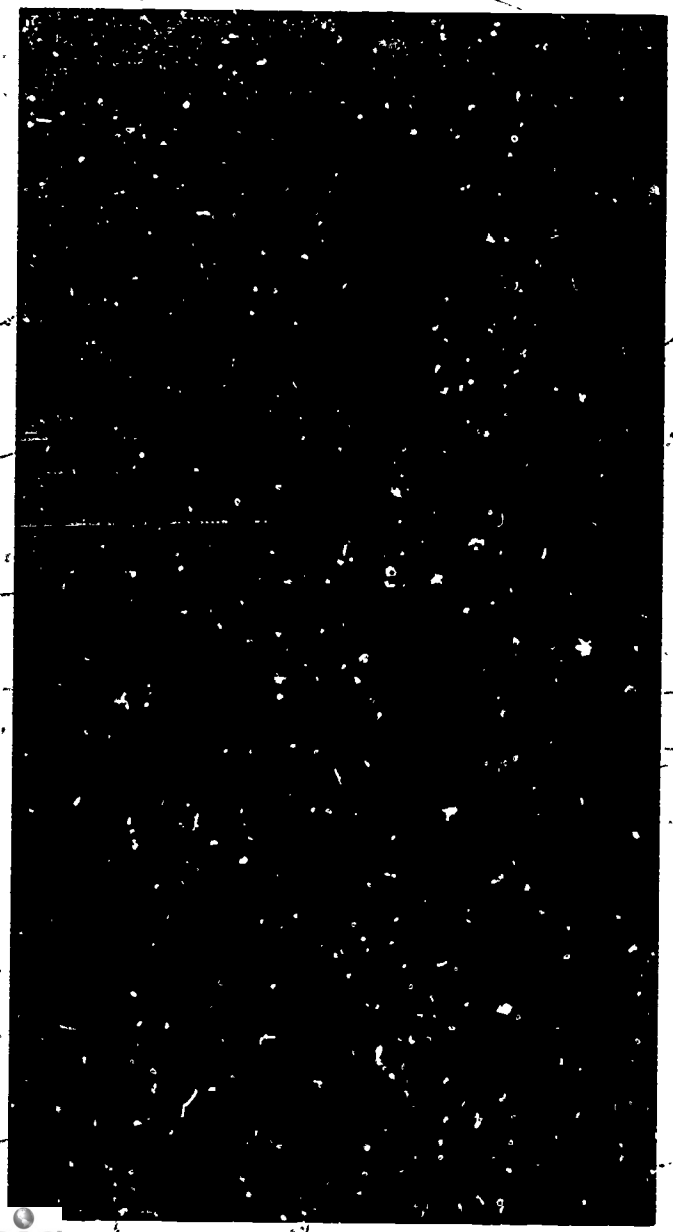
The consensus groups, with all the members sharing the power equally, showed the highest level of satisfaction with the group solution. The members also had highly favorable attitudes toward the process the group followed in reaching its decision and were quite willing to change their opinions in the course of reaching consensus. The leaders of consensus groups tended to take the role of synthesizers by helping communication to flow openly and by working to involve all group members in the decision-making process.

Members of centralist groups, where decisions were made by a leader after consulting with the group, also tended to be satisfied with the groups' decisions, positive toward the decision-making and group interaction processes, and willing to change their opinions about the value of their initial solutions. Lowell had not expected these groups to work so well. Apparently, the primary reason for their success was that the group leaders, although they had final responsibility for decisions, chose to share their power with the group. They worked collaboratively by collecting a variety of ideas and

opinions and "synthesizing them into a solution that requires at the most an informal approval from the group."

In practice, therefore, centralist groups worked very much like consensus groups. Their members felt free to participate, perceived that the group was moving toward a solution, and were pleased that the leader incorporated their ideas into the group decision. It appears, in fact, that the centralist group leaders actually assumed a role similar to what teachers in Knoop and O'Reilly's study considered ideal and that, in practice, this ideal role proved to be highly functional.

The majority-vote groups in Lowell's study, however, were far less successful. Members were generally less satisfied with the solutions the group reached, less willing to change their initial opinions, and less favorable toward the decision-making process than members of other groups. Group leaders often acted as arbitrators between group members endorsing different solutions. The atmosphere in these groups became competitive, with little of the give-and-take that characterized consensus groups. Lowell suggests that poor communication may have caused these groups to function ineffectively, since concentration "on the alternative solutions to the case hinders the development of a common understanding of the facts and clarification of the problem(s)."



Implications

In discussing the practical implications of the above research findings, it is important to recall that participative decision-making is an idea that is still largely untested. The results of the few studies that have been done are far from definitive. As a result, our discussion will offer general suggestions rather than specific instructions about how schools can most effectively respond to the challenge of PDM.

From Piper's work we draw our first and most emphatic conclusion: broader participation in decision-making can indeed promote more correct decisions. It is particularly significant that, while group leaders were often helped by advice, there was no evidence that they were led astray by bad advice.

While PDM clearly can improve the quality of decisions made, how much it increases the satisfaction of those who participate is less certain. The evidence suggests that considerable care should be taken in any effort to design and implement a PDM program. To begin with, the designers should not assume that all personnel desire more participation. The first step in implementing a program should be to determine just who does have the desire to be more involved in decision-making. An ideal program would be selective and voluntary, offering participation to those who want it, without forcing it on those who do not.

It is also important to offer participation in the areas of decision-making that are of most concern to teachers. A program that offers a variety of options could give teachers the opportunity to influence the policies that do influence them, without getting involved in other areas. In those circumstances, teachers who did wish to participate in a certain area would also be likely to be those with the greatest interest and expertise in that area, and therefore, presumably, with the most potential for contributing to better decision-making.

There are many ways the decision-making pie can be cut to give participants more options for involvement. Inkpen and others, for example, divide participation into five broad areas: curriculum planning and adaptation, classroom management, arrangement of the school instructional program, general school organization, and building construction. Establishing decision-making groups in each of these areas would be one way to decentralize PDM. In the area of curriculum, participation might be further decentralized by the development of units dealing with specific academic specialties or grade levels.

Since teachers seem to respond most favorably to participation when it takes forms they consider desirable, it is particularly important to identify the most effective forms of PDM. Unfortunately, some evidence suggests that the most desirable form of participation, consensus, is not always practicable. Since working for consensus requires considerable interaction within a group, it may be time-consuming. In addition, as Schmuck points out, consensus does not appear to work well in groups of more than twenty-five or thirty people. This may indicate that what Lowell calls a centralist approach, with a single decision-maker extensively using the advice of others, could often be the most desirable form of PDM.

It is also important to recognize the importance of the attitudes, values, and leadership style of a school's principal to the success of a program; a PDM strategy must suit the needs of the principal as well as the teachers. Some principals may be comfortable delegating broad powers to a decision making body and working to facilitate the exchange of ideas. Others may prefer to retain final authority and restrict other participants to offering advice and expressing opinions. In any case, however, the principal must be committed to the success of the program and should clearly define how responsibility and authority are to be divided.

One way of developing a program that truly fits the needs of a specific school community is by implementing it gradually, allowing it to evolve, and carefully testing and evaluating its effectiveness, with feedback from participants. As one result of such an evaluation, the participants may see that the program could be more effective if their own skills and expertise were improved. A natural next step might be the design of inservice training sessions providing whatever content is needed.

Our discussion of PDM also implies that schools might benefit from giving a voice in decision-making to other groups within the school community. Students, for example, are directly affected by most school policies and often have unique perspectives on those policies.

Similarly, superintendents might gain some of the benefits of PDM by giving individual school principals chances to participate in district decision-making. PDM appears to be a natural means of strengthening an existing management team, for example. Participative decision-making probably could produce some of the same benefits for districts that it produces for individual schools—better (more realistic, practicable, and well-informed) policy-making, greater satisfaction among participants, and improved system morale.

Ultimately, the key to a successful PDM program is the development of trust and mutual respect among the participants. If these exist, they will foster the open exchange of ideas and feelings that is essential to effective policy-making. After all, no rules or theories can really identify what the most appropriate forms of PDM will be in a given situation. But when the formidable human resources of a school community are employed, a school will have little trouble developing a specific approach tailored to the needs, skills, and aspirations of those who are to participate in the decision-making process.

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